

SUSTAINABILITY HERO

May 2021



Carol Peterson
Sustainable Oakland Green Team
Bergen County

For the past five years, Carol Peterson has led sustainability efforts in Oakland Borough, a silver-certified Sustainable Jersey community located in Bergen County. Smart and tenacious, Carol is relentless in her pursuit to create the sustainably-minded community that she wants to live in. An active participant in environmental and social justice rallies, mushroom forager, monarch protector, tree hugger and electric car driver—Carol said she enjoys being a cog in the sustainability world.

Carol served as the chair of the [Sustainable Oakland Green Team](#) in 2018 and 2019 and as the co-chair in 2020. She was a Commissioner on the [Oakland Environmental Commission](#) from 2017-2020, and was the chair in 2019. In 2019, Sustainable Jersey presented the Creativity and Innovation Award to eight municipalities in the Sustainable Bergen County Hub, of which Carol is a founding member. In 2020, Carol was a recipient of the 5th District Hometown Heroes Award in recognition of her municipal appointments and as a founding member of [Oakland Pride](#). She received the Oakland Elks Lodge #2167 Distinguished Citizen’s Award in 2020.



Carol’s life has not been easy. She is candid about her traumatic childhood and the repercussions that have impacted her life. To her credit, she has used her life experiences as a launching pad for making positive change. She explained, “Because I have walked through fire so many times and have had to navigate as much as I have, I retain an undying passion to make things better. I have the compassion to understand all humans are fallible, especially myself.” She added, “I am compassionate in spite of the hate I was taught. I apologize to the worms on my fishing hook. I hug trees, literally. I spent a year naming the monarchs I released in honor of anyone on my Facebook who lost a loved one and would send them photos of their monarch as they are a symbol of recently lost loved ones. I eat plants with the same respect as eating meat. A life is a life. All is precious.”

Oakland Borough: Sustainable Jersey Silver-Certified: The [Oakland Green Team](#) is a collaborative effort in which volunteers work with local businesses, residents, schools, municipal representatives and other community organizations to foster community involvement in reaching sustainable environmental and fiscally responsible goals. Carol and the Sustainable Oakland Green Team are responsible for creating and implementing innovative recycling programs in Oakland for crayon and markers, plastic toys, plastic film, Styrofoam and batteries. She was crucial in obtaining grants to fund sustainability efforts in Oakland Borough.



Carol said, "When I joined the green team, I was trying to find myself and see where my talents were. I found out I can write grants; I have attention to detail and can create a vision and establish projects to fruition." Alison Fleeson, the current chair of the [Sustainable Oakland Green Team](#), is a friend and frequent collaborator with Carol. Oakland Borough is a Sustainable Jersey silver-certified community. To learn more about the sustainability actions completed, review the Sustainable Jersey [2020 Certification Report for Oakland Borough](#).

Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant and Technical Assistance Program:

Thanks to a grant written by Carol, Oakland Borough was a recipient of the Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant and Technical Assistance Program. Oakland reforested a two-acre area in Great Oak Park surrounding Little Pond Brook which is a Category One (C1) Trout Producing Stream. C1 waters are protected due to their ecological, recreational or fisheries resources. For this project, the green team worked with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Watershed Ambassador's program, Restore Native Plants, Ramapo's One Step, Boy Scouts and community volunteers. In just two days, the community planted and installed stakes and protective greenhouse tubes on 497 native trees and underbrush.



"Leading this project was a life changing experience for me," Carol said. "It showed me what I was capable of. Before the project, I had never planted a tree before. We faced an exhausting number of challenges including thorn bush injuries, poison ivy reactions, plant list changes due to die-off during the winter, macadam in very unexpected places, tool restrictions due to the delicate riparian zones and torrential rain. Despite every difficulty, we were determined to complete the plantings in two days."

The Oakland Green Team with the help of Shade Tree Commission, unloaded trailers of plants, used a color- flagging system to match the plants and planting area and set up a registration/tool area and a demonstration area to show volunteers how to plant and install tubes. On the first day, approximately 350 trees were in planted. Carol said, "On the second day of planting it poured rain. I made a desperate plea on social media for help and nearly forty volunteers came early and completed the planting and tube installation on time." The Roots for Rivers Reforestation Grant and Technical Assistance Program is a partnership between The Nature Conservancy, The Watershed Institute and Sustainable Jersey.

Bergen County Hub Styrofoam Team: As a founding member of the Sustainable Bergen County Hub, Carol worked with eight municipalities to develop a curriculum called "The Science of Styrofoam" and hosted twelve trainings for students in the schools across the county. The workshop, presented at the Oakland Public Library, was geared to grade school students, but parents learned as well. The program involved the local businesses; a "Bergen Styrofoam Free" decal was provided for display. The Bergen County Hub Styrofoam Team conducted nine collection drives, keeping over 3,000 pounds of expanded polystyrene, or "EPS" used for packaging, out of the landfills. Thanks to the advocacy work, the Bergen County Freeholders passed a ban on XPS (or extruded polystyrene) food containers from all county property. In 2019, Sustainable Jersey presented the Creativity and Innovation Award to Fair Lawn, Glen Rock, Leonia, Oakland, Oradell, Ridgewood and Wyckoff for this initiative.



Oakland Library Seed Bank: Carol is proud of her efforts to create the Oakland Library Seed Bank. She wrote a successful grant application and received a \$2,000 Sustainable Jersey grant, funded by the PSEG Foundation, to develop the program. The native and heirloom seeds are available to cardholders at the Oakland Public Library. Residents “check out” seed packets. While there is no due date for return, participants are asked to keep the seed envelopes to save seeds from their harvest to donate back to the seed bank. All of the seeds are native or heirloom varieties of vegetables, herbs and flowers.



Pollinator Gardens: Affectionately known as a Monarch Mom, Carol is serious about restoring the monarch’s habitat and engaging her community in recovery efforts. Threatened with widespread habitat loss, increased use of pesticides and climate change impacts, monarchs have suffered a population decline upward of ninety percent in recent decades. In Oakland Borough, two pollinator gardens were created in Great Oak Park. Carol identified all of the plants that are beneficial to pollinators and educated members of the Oakland Environmental Commission, the Sustainable Oakland Green Team and volunteers from the public. Between both pollinator garden locations, over 150 common milkweed plants were found. In addition, Goldenrod, Columbine, Yarrow and Joe Pye weed were detected and preserved. The pollinator garden team was taught to identify mugwort, poison ivy and poison oak which occupied most of the space. Carol said, “In the newly cleared areas, we planted 100 butterfly milkweed plants. We hope to create an official monarch way station. Monarch butterflies visited us as we were planting.” Three eggs were collected from the property to home raise and release in order to increase the chances of survival by up to eighty percent.



Oakland Community Garden: Carol and Alison Fleeson are the founders of the [Oakland Community Garden](#) located behind Oakland Borough Hall. The garden is supported by a \$20,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation, which Carol and Alison obtained. The garden was designed by the Sustainable Oakland Green Team in partnership with the Oakland Senior Center and local community garden contractor, Farmburbia. Residents of all ages and abilities can use the garden. The elderly or disabled who have mobility needs can use the custom beds built with a level concrete pad that accommodates use of a wheelchair or walker. The Sustainable Oakland Green Team plans to make food donations to the town food bank and incentives will be provided to garden members who donate food.

More About Carol: Carol credits her grandmother, Emily Hoffmann, as the most influential person in her early development. She said, “We spent a lot of time together reading, discovering nature and being kind.” Carol added, “My hobbies include geeking out on plants, pop culture, cooking everything from scratch and obsessing over my cat who is a melanistic polydactyl Bengal named Crash Bandicoot. He is currently exploring job opportunities such as cold calling about your vehicle's warranty and working the night shift as a security dog. While he is named after one of my son’s favorite video games, Crash has now grown to resemble Jiji from Kiki’s Delivery Service.”

